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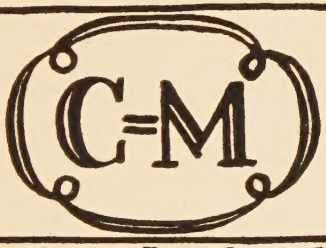
EBONY FLAME

VINCENT STARRETT



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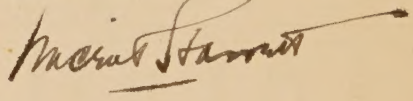

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V. S.

To the W. G. A.
L. M. S.
B. J. S.

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EBONY FLAME

Now, if you do not like the thoughts I think,
Blame him who dwells within my well of ink:
A wicked genie, with an evil eye . . .
Who meets his gaze must either write or die.

And, if you do not like the way I write,
Remember that 'tis cousin to the night,
To darkness (I, a simple messenger),
When only does my dark companion stir.

But, if this black connection you admire,
Here is my hand, your chair beside the fire.
Look! As I poise a pen and cry his name . . .
Out of the pit, a tongue of ebon flame!

MAVIS

I shall call my daughter Mavis
When, if ever, I have a daughter;
That is a sweet and happy name,
And I have loved it long and well.
I am so pleased by the name of Mavis
That I would give something very valuable—
A bracelet, or a string of emeralds,
Or a rare first edition of George Moore—
To anyone who would conjure me a daughter named
Mavis.

I would teach her the splendor of her name,
So that she would pronounce it as I wished,
With just that shade of tenderness
And just that shade of triumph.
Early in the morning I would call her, "Mavis!"
And then at intervals throughout the day
Until at dark I said, "Good night, my Mavis!"
And when she lay in slumber I would whisper
"Mavis" until I, too, had fallen asleep,
Lulled by the magic syllables of "Mavis."

If she were here to-day,
Already grown, and lovely as a rainbow,
I should walk with her in the sunny streets,
She leaning upon my arm and brightly smiling,
And I should call her "Mavis . . . Mavis . . . Mavis."
So that all them that passed
Would marvel at the wonder of her name,

And envy me, gray-haired and proudly parental,
Beside that miracle of nomenclature.

She would perhaps dislike the name
After the long years of my adoration,
And tire of being called without a purpose
Other than to allow my voice its pleasure;
She would wish that her name were anything but Mavis—
Edith, or Grace, or Katherine, or Mary;
But I should reward her with a thousand presents
Labeled with little cards, "With love to Mavis,"
So that I might find pleasure new and fragrant
Writing down "Mavis" for my lovely daughter.

Maker of lovely things, custodian of all wisdom.
Give me a daughter
That I may call her Mavis!

PAN PIPES

The bank which in my wanderings
Sometimes I chance to pass,
Has handsome crystal chandeliers
And doors of polished brass . . .

O once I had a copper cent;
I didn't have it long.
I spent my penny for a pipe
And piped a little song.

And many pass with eager tread
Into the banker's place,
And drop their dollars in his box,
With shining eyes and face . . .

O once I piped a little song
For tired little men:
But still they put their dollars in
And take them out again.

CHIMNEYS

My window looks across a field
  Of leaping chimney-stalagmites;
And some by others are concealed,
  And some arise to splendid heights;
And over every house and tree
  There hangs a gas barrage of coke;
But one small stack blows up to me
  A wistful question-mark of smoke.

I cannot see the folks who light
  The fires beneath this masque of flues;
Their deeds by day, their acts of night,
  Nor what the brand of coke they use;
But from a window just below
  One little stack, most every day
There looks a girl I do not know
  Who quickly turns her head away.

PANORAMA FROM AN "L" TRAIN

Two sudden feet project beyond a sill;
A whift of factory pickles fills the air;
Madeline's mother summons, fiercely shrill;
In a back window Susan dries her hair.
Crooning, a child hangs from a balcony:
Now, in a panic, it is snatched within,
And a quick flash of startled lingerie
Conjures a passing, backward-glancing grin.

A fog of smoke drifts upward from a train
Roaring beneath; a sparrow swears and scolds.
Needle-like cinders tap upon the pane . . .
"Dr. Tarr's Honey Bothers Coughs and Colds!"
The black belt—shabby houses, row on row—
Its second stories level with the eye,
Wheels darkly past, and in a yard below
A nigger mammy hangs white clothes to dry.

VERITAS PRAEVALEBIT!

The glory that was Vansittart
  Lies underneath a ton of sod.
There were no secrets to impart
  When he stepped off to meet his God.
The whole town knew his history,
  And some were glad and others lied;
But only little Kitty Cree
  Knew why he wept before he died.

The splendor that was Kitty Cree
  A tarnished memory became
When Vansittart's *diablerie*
  Was but a jest-inducing name.
Her suicide set tongues a-tick;
  They wagged like pendulums about her,
And said with pious rhetoric
  There always had been cause to doubt her.

AN IRON DOG

In Memory Street, an iron dog
Stands guard upon a rusted lawn:
He looms up through a shifting fog
Like leaping conscience in the dawn;
But why he stands, and what he guards,
The old policeman does not know,
Though other dogs from other yards
Smile wisely as they come and go.

When sunlight streams about the place,
The boys who make the present crowd
Ride on his back, and slap his face,
And play his bark is fierce and loud;
But in the rain or in the fog
He seems to listen and to wait.
He is a very faithful dog . . .
And there are scratches on my gate!

PARADOX

My thoughts to-night are lone and far;
One rang against a distant star.
I thought the star plunged to the sea,
And felt the waves rush over me.

Then one who fished with silken net
Drew forth the star, all shining wet,
And flung it swiftly to the sky;
And, lo! the fisherman was I.

So, thoughts are strange, and life is queer,
And stars are often very near;
And fishermen with nets of dream
Snare more than pebbles in the stream.

CRESCENT MOON

The sight, I think, is more than odd . . .
Outside the roadhouse kept by God
The lounging stars, with youthful din,
Shout down the banqueting within,
And with their socialistic roar
Persuade the Landlord to the door.

The stars with mocking laughter fly
Across the prairies of the sky,
While after the vexatious gang
God hurls a silver boomerang . . .
I hope it will not turn and strike
A kind old Gentleman I like.

AMBITION

Then to be dead on plains of sonant glory!—
To kneel, myself beside, with strangled breath;
To bear away the litter—spread the story—
And cry above the bier that shining death!

Mutely to stand, a multitude of mourners,
Head bared, with somber eyes upon the road,
Where, flag-draped, past the deeply-breathing corners,
Slowly I pass to my strait, dim abode.

To be the banner's boast, the bugle's sorrow;
The volley o'er the mounded earth, the tread
Of marching feet; the silence of the morrow,
When, with a shock, I read that I am dead.

To be the quill that lusters famous pages,
The hand that drives the pen, the eyes that see
The worship and the wonder of the ages . . .
To be the grief, the joy, the mystery!

TRAIN WRECK

Around me were the tortured masks of men,
The torn, sad shapes of women whose low cries
Struck terribly into the heart . . . Again
I shuddered, and with swift and fearful eyes
Sought that familiar face I feared to find;
Then cried out as, unharmed, I saw her kneel
With wet, sweet face, now agonized and lined,
Beside a broken form whose mute appeal
Seemed somehow antecedently to be
Part of the deepest thought and soul of *me*.

But, as I would have hurried to her side
With quick assurance, eager arms apart,
A kindly hand persuaded me to bide
A moment, and a voice that stilled my heart
Spoke words of old affection, low and sweet;
And he, my long-wept friend, was strangely near,
Who with a little smile restrained my feet,
Saying, "Dear fellow, wait! She cannot hear!"
"Roger!" I cried in terror, "you are dead!"
His fine smile held my eyes . . . "And you?" he said.

HIEROGLYPHICS

The way that smoke twists upward in the sky,
The form a cloud takes, slowly drifting by,
The dimness hanging over distant hills,
The shapes of snowflakes on the window sills;
The haunting faces flowers lift at dawn,
The furtive tears I find upon my lawn . . .
Little, familiar things in alien guise
That overwhelm with breathless, swift surmise.

The song a kettle sings upon the fire,
The solemn finger of a sudden spire,
The drone of bees and water, faintly heard,
The silver query of a secret bird;
The gaze of friendly beasts, a curious shell,
The second echo of a far-off bell . . .
Tremendous trifles! Bell and wing and glow!
What do they mean? Sometimes I almost know.

CHANGELING

The gallows tree is straight and tall
Save for the jutting single limb . . .
And from a spot across the road,
I watched the tortured legs of him
Who dangled there . . .
The hangman laughed
So merry was the sight withal.
The hangman's daughter, standing near,
Was lovely as a waterfall.
Her yellow hair streamed over her;
Her symmetry was starkly limned . . .
I loathed and loved her, and it seemed
Her scarlet roses glowed and dimmed
As my wild eyes upon her fed.
Her glance was free and bold, I thought . . .
Our tryst was secret, when the dark
Had fallen, where the corpse hung taut
In the red moon . . .
The curséd babe
Was hideous as Hell, and we
Shrieked as we knew the twisted face
Of him who decked the gallows tree.

ENCOUNTER

Along the dead white boulevards of Time,
Littered with dying hopes and grinning fears,
I thought I saw my Past stalk forth one day
Upon adventure bent . . . and as it trod the years
A smile of exquisite bitterness sat upon
The cynic lips, and a low laugh maliciously
Taunted the shattered dreams along the way,
Erstwhile a part of its own ecstasy . . .

And then a-down the months the other way,
Stepping from misty darkness into light,
A fearsome figure strode . . . I saw my Future stand
Upon the dim frontier of coming night,
With glittering eyes . . . And that first traveler
Who scornfully the charnel way had trod,
Grew limp before the menace of its gaze
And fell to shrieking for a spurnéd God.

EXERCISE FOR LEFT HAND

Never rides a bark to shore
Fair as at sea,
Nor ever shines a sail
White as across blue water.

Never blooms a rose so red
As that caressed
And idly thrown away
One knows not where.

Nor ever comes a day
Happy as one sweet other;
Nor love
Fragrant as love long past...

Black barks in harbor,
Silver sails close furled,
Breath of dead roses
Stealing my strength away!

.... Long vanished day!

O Love,
That sweetest love should always be
The love of yesterday!

BUTTERFLIES OF UGANDA

Butterflies of Africa: drifting clouds of blue:
  Clouds of white and yellow drift: carnival of reds:
Sunset flashes at the noon: shining fields of dew:
  Snowflakes stung to ecstasy: floating tulip beds!

Mardi Gras of loveliness: brilliant masquerade:
  Wheeling, reeling companies of Lilliput hussars;
Blue and white the canopy, green the velvet shade...
  In the night of wonderment, are you silver stars?

DREAMER

He was dismayed by life's harsh waking view;
  Only in dreams he found escape from dread;
And so he laid him down to sleep, and drew
  The coverlet of water o'er his head.

Then, as he slept, a murmur fled away:
  "Genius!" they whispered, wishing he might rise
And place upon his brow the wreath of bay...
  Poor dreamer, with the dead, clairvoyant eyes!

GOD'S RIDING

By night, with flogging whip He rides the breeze,
And dreadful hoofs make thunder in the hills.
The servile grasses and the tortured trees
Bow down and tremble where His trumpet shrills.

Again He rides, and where His banners run
Gay flowers quicken in the trampled sod.
Earth leaps to beauty neath the goading sun,
The pricking rowel on the heel of God.

PICTURE

Brown for the autumn leaves,
  Green for the tree;
White for the flying sail,
  Blue for the sea.

Gray for the solemn priest,
  Red for the lass;
Black for the silent boy
  Dead in the grass.

HOUSE

The little house across the way
  Conceals some dreadful mystery.
Its green-fringed eyes, day after day,
  Stare at my windows fearfully.
The door that is its mouth, it seems,
  Shrieks mutely of an evil deed.
I cannot still the voiceless screams...
  Why do the drooping willows bleed?

RETURN

In rooms long stranger to my tread
  My soul knelt down and wept;
The gray walls whispered of the dead,
  The sad-eyed windows slept;
And memories of perished years
  Were all that bade me stay...
And those I kissed, with sudden tears,
  And those I bore away.

POET AS PEASANT

Miriam is Mary now,
  Muriel is Jane,
And I make my lyric bow
  In another vein.

I have hired a little place
  Out beyond the town;
I am done with any face
  Not of country brown.

I have leased a Thomas cat
  And a mottled cow;
I shall wear a ragged hat
  And be happy now.

I shall write a little verse
  Every summer day;
Listen to the birds rehearse,
  Merrier than they.

Anthea shall Alice be;
  Beatrice is Sue—
Oh, remember, Lalage,
  All of these are you!

POSSESSION

You who belong to another,
And are mine;
You who will wear another's name
Where all may see,
And mine, like a scarlet letter,
Beneath your bodice—
After the blasphemy of words is over,
And sudden laughter shrills,
Many will think to read your happiness
On your gay lips—
Poor, gay, sad, lying lips!—
And he who will possess your fragrant husk
Will marvel at the strangeness of your eyes...
But you—
You who belong to another, and are mine—
You will read loathing in your mirror;
Scorn
In the gray eyes that give you stare for stare;
Hate
In the quick heart that, spite of you, was true.
You will recall a day of scarlet splendor,
And a cold flame will burn with icy breath,
And you will come to me,
Dry-eyed,
Through the sobbing night.

FLOTSAM

Who cares for these slight songs I sing?—this rhyme
  That hides a soul's unuttered ecstasy?
And will my little raptures for a time
  Outlive their parent? Once upon the sea
I saw a chip, wave-driven, breast the flood
  That greenly strove its insolence to submerge,
And laughed to see the valiant fragment scud
  Before the fury of the water's urge.

Its curious malformation made it seem
  A relic of some child's abandoned play,
Far journied from the quaint, quiescent stream
  Where it was launched and sent upon its way.
So it may be some song that I have sung
  Will voyage for a space, impenitent:
If it but echo that I once was young,
  That once I lived and loved, I am content.

AIR DE GRIEF

As a youth I longed to be
  Kindly, bearded, white,
Spectacled and scholarly,
  Underneath a light
Falling on a printed page
  Spread across my knee;
In that placid picture, age
  Seemed quite fine to me.

How the years have flickered by!
  Here is book and light;
Here are spectacles, and my
  Hair is turning white.
Beard alone has failed the scheme—
  May it never start!
In this triumph of my dream
  Age appals my heart!

VERMILLION SQUARE

On summer nights Vermillion Square
  Is very brave and proud.
A band performs, and everywhere
  The people push and crowd.

In couples and in droves they pass,
  Or lie upon the ground.
They trample down the Sunday grass
  And scatter peanuts 'round.

But in this curious parade
  I never join—not I!
I pick a cool place in the shade
  And watch myself go by.

IN A FAIR GARDEN

In a fair garden, low beneath the moon,
White Pierrot dreams of Pierrette's dainty shoon,
  No bigger than a roseleaf, and as fair,
  Nimble as poets' fancies, light as air,
Dancing around the world to Pierrot's tune.

How worn they seem! O negligent buffoon,
That, spendthrift, spends a golden afternoon
  In folly dreaming! Wake, for *she* is there
    In a fair garden.

Ah, 'tis a sight to make a Bishop swoon!
Bowered in roses drunk with fragrant June...
  See, she has crept into your blossom'd lair.
  Waken indeed, Friend, an you would not share
Her kisses, or 'tis I that shall be soon
    In a fair garden!

PAN

In a dim grotto of the wood, they said,
Great Pan lies dead...
And then they flew
Laughing across the sand, but paused anew,
Clad in white chastity, upon the brink—
Shy fawns at drink,
Half frightened by
The murmuring treetops and the water's sigh—
Viewing the wood with half-alarmed grimace
For a strange face.
The goat-eared Pan,
They said, bravado-wise, is not a man,
But a dead god, an antique legend sung
To charm the young...
And then the sea
Robed them in living jewels, lavishly;
Clasped his wet arms about them—young and slim—
Drew them to him.

Beware, Old Sea!
Do you not fear Pan's maddened jealousy?
Do you think, too, that Pan is dead and cold,
Deep in the gold
Dead leaves of fall,
Leaving all this to you as seneschal?
Long since you heard the cloven hoof resound
Upon the ground,
Since your pale glass
Gave back his image. Ah, the years may pass
But Pan lives yet, for love is more than death!
Heard you a breath
Hot in the wood
Where in your youth a shaggy lover stood?
Then not too far, old graybeard charlatan,
For I am Pan!

A RONDEAU OF SONNETS
(In Memory of Andrew Lang)

What sonnet do you fancy?—if indeed
You fancy any, now that verse is freed!
Shall it be Swinburne, Aldrich, or divine
Rossetti that I read you, Friend of Mine?—
Or for what other shall you intercede?

So be it! Let us sate our sonnet greed
With him who satisfies that special need—
With Andrew, eh?—And so, for auld Lang syne,
What sonnet?

Let us begin—and you, my friend, shall lead,
And I shall follow on a second steed
Borrowed from Villon or some other fine
Old rascal. *Voila!* First a stoup of wine,
Then plunge to any page you will, and read
What's on it!

APOLOGY TO BROWNING

For that my wisdom was small,
For that my ego was big,
Once I sneered bravely withal;
Cried, for your verses—a fig!
Thought that *your* thought was involved
(Maybe it is—never mind;
When it is puzzled and solved
There is some substance behind);
Thought that your muse was a clod,
Heavy, and awkward, and dull;
Thought that your prating of God
Made *me* some kind of a gull.
Well, I was young—very young;
Fond of a dulcimer meter;
Long as to hair and to tongue—
Yes, I thought Tennyson sweeter.
Not that you care in the least
That I spoke of your rhyming as clowning!—
But I, who came late to your feast,
Am humbly a penitent, Browning.

LITERARY NOTE

Books and cooks are closely wed
In my fond and foolish head.
Brain and belly are befriended
By those dispensations splendid—
Yea, my heart and soul are joyed
When I hear such words employed.

I should like a restaurant
Up against some bookish haunt,
That in either I might find
Food to satisfy the mind—
Solid fowl and flesh, or airy
Salad for the solitary.

RAIN

It wonders me that I should love the rain,
  The long swift rain that rivers in the street;
  That whispers stories sinister and sweet
In the dull rhythms of its endless strain.

Fiercely I breathe its ancient mystery,
  Now as it dirks the night with lambent gleams...
  And ever when the yellow sunlight streams
Its antiphon mourns in the heart of me.

PALIMPSEST

The canopy of blue and gold
  That roofed my morning years
Is clouded with a mottled mould,
  And big with iron tears.

There once upon a vellum sky
  Youth's eager hopes were spread.
What critic hand has written high
  These symbols bleak and dread?

AT THE BIRTHPLACE OF A DEAD POET

Still greens the grass upon the sod
As when he tramped these country lanes,
And where the orchards lift to God
Their heavy fragrance after rains,
Stand still the trees he loved and knew,
The awkward fences that he climbed...
The sky above is still as blue
As when he learned it could be rhymed.

I do not see him in the trees
Nor by the runing river's brim;
Such breathless humors, while they please,
And would have been no trick for *him*,
Are shut from me by many veils.
I walk the ways he must have known,
And try to fancy in the trails
His footprints pressed beneath my own.

TWO HORSEMEN

Life came riding up the vale
  On a yellow steed,
Helmet off; his coat of mail
Shining like a polished pail—
  Thus it was decreed.
"Here's a penny for you, Lad.
We are brothers! Are you glad?"
  This was Life, indeed!

Death came riding up the lane
  On a sable steed,
Visor down; his coat of chain
Black as was his horse's mane—
  Thus it was decreed.
"Here's your penny, Sir Disguise:
You can not conceal your eyes!"
  This was Death, indeed—
  This was Life, indeed!

MICHAEL

My lover's ship did not go down:
  It sailed into the setting sun.
I watched across the sands from town
  Until the golden goal was won.

Upon a sea of molten glass
  It sailed across the world's red rim;
With spreading sails I saw it pass
  Into a glory none shall dim.

Yet there are some that wring their hands
  And will not cease their doleful cries...
I look across the blazing sands
  And smile into my lover's eyes.

SELF-SLAIN

He was come to the edge of the wood,
  And he paused on the quiet frontier.
The darkness clung close like a hood,
  And there splashed in the silence a tear...
Down, down to the place where he stood
  Echoed starkly the footsteps of fear.

He knelt in the dew, as to pray...
  And his riven frame pitched to the knoll;
And a wisp of smoke floated away
  To what mystical, ultimate goal!
There was no one to wonder or say
  If the darkness went out of his soul.

HIC JACET

Here lies John Lorengood—a simple name,
Unknown to history and to acclaim.
The willows droop across his bed of earth
In this quaint village where he had his birth.
No clash of voices breaks upon his rest
With futile praise. A bird has made its nest,
And feeds its young, and sings, above his head,
While he sleeps late—blest privilege of the dead.

John Lorengood, perhaps your life was spent
In this obscurity and this content.
No bloody charge your awful glory weighs,
No book the tumult of your soul betrays;
Deserving much, you have deserved repose,
And the recurrent tribute of a rose...
I who with fatuous trust pursue the flame
Falter before the grandeur of your fame.

AMANUENSIS

What eager urge directs my thought
And drives this stubborn pen?—
Fills me with memories, wonder-fraught,
Of clouds and trees and men;
Torments me with a dream of fame
Immortal and benign...?
O wondrous and consuming flame
That marvels to be mine!

Is it perhaps some deathless shade
That whispers secret words
Wherewith the world I might persuade
And sing beyond the birds?
O that, when I have grasped his theme
With sudden passioned cry,
He should forsake that valiant dream
And leave me—only I!

SILVER POPLAR

Nothing more lorn, more lone, more lovely is,
I think, than this...
A silver poplar lonely on a hill,
The sun behind. The air at first is still,
But a light whisper quickens, and a breeze
Pushing through other and more distant trees,
With faintly pattering, far off tapping drums
And whipping banners comes;
Rushes across the void... The crispéd leaves
Bend double as the foliate spendor heaves.
An argent glory shimmers, quivers, dances,
Till in the sunny flame of darting lances
The foam of seas
Sparkles in sunshine, and the mounting breeze
Stirs the quick leaves to keening melody;
A curious sorcery
That whispers at the heart like distant play
Of rippling water in a little bay...
And then the swelling wind becomes a roar,
And gaunt waves dash upon a rocky shore
In a white smother, and at length subside
Into the garrulous murmur of the tide...

In the cool shadow of the hill I lie
While the breeze patters by.

RETROSPECT

An hour ago the lights were fey,
  And women moved with silken grace,
And music made the maskers gay,
  And laughter eddied through the place.
An hour ago! but all is gone:
  One figure only I recall—
A girl with hair of ruddy dawn
  Who checked my garments in the hall.

A lot of famous folk were there
  Who in my vision dim and fade.
It was, I think, a brave affair—
  Perfume and powder, gold and braid!
But now 'tis all a vague surmise:
  One presence only I recall—
A girl with lovely, scornful eyes
  Who checked my garments in the hall.

DOXOLOGY TO A GOOD CITIZEN

What shall we say of Avondale,
  But lately of our planet?—
Save that he carried on a tale
  When someone else began it;
Save that he voted nearly right
  On every proposition;
Save that he stayed at home at night
  And held a fair position;
Save that his fervor was derived
  From other people's thinking;
Save that his seven children thrived
  And none inclined to drinking;
Save that he played a steady hand
  At whist, and bowled not badly;
Save that he loved his native land,
  His wife and babies madly;
Save—'Tis a simple, poignant tale,
  This slight suburban story:
But, O, from such as Avondale
  Deliverance, Saints in Glory!

SIRENICA

Your eyes are pools of purple moonlit wine
  Across whose sweep gleam fiery flecks of gold:
False beacons crying harbor unto mine...
  I drown within the madness that they hold.

Your eyes are braziers of caressing fire,
  Consuming tongues of flagrant yellow flame.
Pile high the fagots on my funeral pyre!
  The smoke of torment shall inscribe your name.

Your eyes are daedal wishes. O they gleam
  Now wistful-sweet, now passionately wise!
Danger and death are in their burning dream:
  And yet...and yet...Heart of my Heart, your eyes...!

NASTURTIUM

Amber-maiden, sun-caressed,
  Dewy, nectar-brimmed,
In such splendor are you dressed,
  In such glory limned...
Are you something more than flower
Nodding in your orient bower?

What do you become at eve—
  In the langorous night?
May a lover then achieve
  Favor in your sight?
All life's rapture I would risk
For your smile, dear odalisque!

I shall leave the tear-faced rose
  To her buccaneers,
Jilt the red-cheeked Jacqueminots
  Spite of all their tears.
Amber-maiden, lovely flower,
Pray you name the blissful hour!

REVELATION

As out beyond the heedless, roaring town,
In Crusoe wonder, threading forest ways,
I walked, the lanes in ribald beauty swam,
Drunk with desire, beneath an opal haze.
The mysteries of pulsing root and branch,
Of joyous hoof and wing, and odorous breeze,
Charged with a tacit import seemed, and—mute—
I listened to the trees.

Then down a strange and yet familiar path,
Borne upon heaving turf, in breathless thought
I passed, where burning beauty shone about
The things no hands for other hands had wrought.
A secret whisper thrilled upon the air;
Startled, I heard a flattered woodbird call...
And suddenly I fled away before
The terror of it all!

A MOOD

Outside the rain falls sullenly. The day
  Was never dreary as this day, it seems.
Gay voices near me laugh the hours away;
  They find no time for melancholy dreams.

What is it on my spirit seems to pall?—
  Grim something that I cannot put away!
I have no hurt, no sorrow to recall—
  And yet—and yet how sorrowful the day!

LONELINESS

The whistle of a train at night
Sometimes seems more than heart can bear.
I do not see the rushing light
Nor feel the hot exhaust of air;
I only hear the distant tread
Of wheels, and then that keening cry—
But all the loneliness and dread
Of life is in that long "Good bye!"

LAUGHTER

Your laughter is a careless brook
  In sunshine speeding.
Your laughter is a yellow book
  For furtive reading.

Your laughter is an icy stream
  In which none dives.
Your laughter is the slim bright gleam
  Of cruel knives.

Your laughter is a child that runs
  With guileless prattle.
Your laughter is the crash of guns
  In sudden battle.

Your laughter is a spray of bells
  On Christmas morning.
Your laughter is a gust of Hell's
  Unbridled scorning.

AN EVENING IN NOVEMBER

Outside, the lashing, swirling rain,
And a cold wind that cut the heart:
But, O, within, soft candles in the dusk,
And a queer Oriental lantern, hung apart
In a far corner, near the firelight glow,
Over heaped pillows of a quaint design...
And one beside me in the shouting silence,
Looking with eyes of startled understanding into mine.

NOCTURNE (Op. 1)

We called him something loud and free
And tossed him through the door.
The night received him patiently,
As somewhat of a bore—
He'd gone that way before.

He left behind him on the bar
And scattered 'round the place,
A hat, a cuff, a chewed cigar,
Some pieces of his face—
And the disputed ace.

He didn't mind our coltish play;
He took it with a leer;
But it was pitiful the way
He whimpered for his ear—
We'd dropped it in the beer!

BOOBY PRIZE

It seems I trumped an ace—my partner's ace—
  And bid too high, and paid too great attention
  To airs and fingers in the fourth dimension.
I should, it seems, have watched my partner's face.

Her face—Ye Gods! Ah, well I won a prize:
  That painted kewpie on the mantel there!
  In it I see again the vapid stare
Of that depraved old dromedary's eyes.

MY LORD'S MOTORING

He was an arrogant cat, *My Lord,*
Or ever he heard of Henry Ford.
He sat in the windows, east and west,
Amber eyes and a snow-white vest,
Watching the silly children run,
Staring haughtily at the sun:
Nothing disturbed him in the least,
Nor touched the pride of that stately beast.

Then, on a day, we went to ride
I in the wheel-seat, he beside.
Never a move that advertised
He was the slightest bit surprised;
He sat up straight as a millionaire,
A snob of snobs in a parlor chair—
But once, when I missed a boy at play,
I thought he winked in a knowing way.

FOOTSTEPS OF FEAR

Who travels this cold road alone by night?
  Footsteps! They follow, follow, follow after!
There is no human thing in mortal sight...
  Footsteps!... and mocking laughter!

They echo in my brain, they slowly beat
  Upon my heart with careful, strange insistence.
They whisper in the long deserted street...
  Laughter, across the distance!

Why is the moon so cruel and so white?
  White is her shadow in the black street canyon.
Footsteps that pace beside me... But the light
  Reveals no dark companion.

Who travels thus beside me through the dark?
  The road is endless, and the day comes never...
Footsteps of fear, and I shall hear them—Hark!—
  For ever and for ever!

POETRY

It is a little room, a secret room,
  Within a palace falling to decay,
Wherein I tryst with one that was myself...
  And, O! the world is more than life away!

It is a little ship upon the sea,
  Bravely adrift, I know not whither blown,
Nor where the low reef of the harbor lies...
  But a far bell calls, and I sail alone.

It is a little gate beside a road,
  And strait the way to scornful eyes may seem,
But who shall lift the latch and pass within
  May pluck the fruit of his unconquered dream.

UNCAPTIVE

Whose eyes have looked on hidden things
  Nor hate nor walls have strength to bind;
He journeys on an ageless quest,
  His voice is in the changing wind.

They fettered steel about his soul,
  They put his body in a cell,
But while a single cloud looked in
  His covert chamber all was well.

Upon his wall the pontiff moon
  Shadowed the menace of his bars:
Joyful, he breathed the strength of night,
  And walked among the laughing stars.

Then shall they hurt us as they will,
  So that the secret glory gleams.
For the captivity of life
  There is the recompense of dreams.

PIERROT THE URCHIN
(Paul Verlaine)

This is not Pierrot on the green—
Vague Pierrot, sporting half unseen—
'Tis Pierrot, Pierrot, Pierrot!
Pierrot, the urchin, madcap he,
Stripped of his mask and mimicry—
Ah, Pierrot, Pierrot, Pierrot!

Although no bigger than a mite
The rascal's eyes are all alight;
With sparks of steel they're flaming.
They dance with demon lights, it seems;
They leap with sudden, scornful gleams
For a gay poet's shaming.

Lips red as wounds, whose scarlet pout
Is slumberous luxury's redoubt;
Face fair as lily's lining,
And splendid although somewhat wan—
Such face as loves to gaze upon
The golden things and shining.

Supple and lithe his girlish form,
Voice soft and, like a woman's, warm;
Mature his shape, though elfish.
His thrilling tone, his raiment gay
Proclaim a lover, seeking aye
To sate each pleasure selfish.

Go, Brother—Comrade—where they teem,
And play the devil, seek thy dream
Where'er thou wilt—thy Pierrettes—
And be the soul unscrupulous,
High, noble, lively, infamous,
Of these our simple spirits.

Grow, Scapegrace, others are not shy!
Thy bitter riches multiply;
Enhance thy reputation,
Thy virtue, and thy people's love!
Thy grimace is the symbol of
Our simple congregation.

MEMORIAL DAY

Drums in the city street
Monotonously rolling,
And marching feet
In the measures of the beat,
And flags,
And far bells tolling...

Sabbath in the warm breeze;
By the graves, weeping.
Birds on the lilied air,
Caroling, leaping,
And sudden blossoms where
Beneath the trees
The dead are sleeping.

Bugles in the twilight
Piercingly calling.
Bugle echoes, clear and far,
Falling... falling...
(From what bright star?
And Whose tears do they seem
To them that dream?)

And then,
Again
The muffled drum, the tread of feet,
And hearts that beat
With long thoughts to the throbbing drum,
The sobbing drum,
The drum...
Drum...
Drum...

SPRING SONG

Now crack with mirth your wintry lips,
  And loose your limbs to gladness,
And hang a garland on your hips
  And leap with pleasant madness.

Now pitch away your book of dreams
  And hark the highway calling:
Again the minnesinger streams
  Down pebbled trails are brawling.

Now songbirds blossom on the haw—
  Shall not the poet sing
When trees o'er naked fingers draw
  The glad green gloves of spring?

OMEN

Apes in scarlet petticoats
  Dance a rigadoon—
Pennies for the broken notes
  Of a murdered tune.

Grind your organ, Angelo,
  For the tickled throng;
Summer's skipping down the row—
  Hey! Another song!

TWO A. M.

The clock hands creep around the clock...
A milk cart rattles down the block...
And once more silence flutters down
Darkly upon the sleeping town.

My window faces to the breeze...
The secret voices of the trees,
Half-heard, half-felt, cry in my ears...
My heart is strange with eager fears.

To-morrow, I shall grieve that I
Sat up so late to watch the sky;
But now... Who knows what hidden sight
May be revealed to me this night!

BRIDGE

The bridge is long and white and fine,
  And lined with rails of polished brass;
At night its carbon clusters shine
  On laughing throngs that pass and pass.

Beneath, the singing water flows
  As smoothly as a pictured stream,
Dappled with yellow gleams and glows
  Like sprites that vanish in a dream.

Only within my furtive nook
  Does shadow shield from kind alarms...
Ay, chuckle, Water, while they look!
  I shall sleep soundly in your arms.

HARLEQUIN

(Theodore de Banville)

From the cat he steals his grace,
From the dog his whiskered face.
He has taken from the king
Of his purple robe a string;
From the Jew a bit of yellow;
From the Spring this lawless fellow
Has purloined a bit of green,
And the whole, with solemn mien,
He has made a garment gay
To wear upon a holiday.

Round his waist a scarlet belt
Holds a slapstick, often felt.
On his feet are scarlet shoon;
With quicksilver— gay buffoon!—
They are lined; and how they prance
In some ancient, pagan dance!
At his hat I laugh aloud:
Did he carve it from a cloud?
He's an organ grinder's ape—
Yet how lithe his graceful shape!

Thus, attended like a king,
Skillful as a Jew; like Spring
Come with April's flowering bloom,
Hums he like a busy loom
Through the cities and the fields,
Seeking all that Springtime yields:
Followed by coy Columbine,

Amorous and half-divine,
Who, the more the monster beats,
More adores his knavish feats.

With what hideous flutterings,
Like a moth with painted wings,
Now he clasps her fluid charms
In his careless, cruel arms—
Courts, caresses, entertains
In conquered and enchanted lanes,
Where Nature sleeps the summer through
And lesser gods make rendezvous—
Till, tired of kissing, with a shrug
He offers Toby's ugly mug—
C'est Harlequin!

A HYMN OF HATE

Beside Francesca Brown, my wife's dear friend,
  Iago was a big, good-natured slob;
And if some unofficial vengeance end
  Her vile career, 'twill be a splendid job.
And I shall caper happily what time
  They tell me she has fled to occult shores,
Who never let the sun to zenith climb
  Until her tongue had probed a dozen sores.

Beside Francesca Brown of fair repute,
  Who lives a blameless life, and has a class,
"Yond Cassius" was a blundering recruit,
  And Ballantrae a simple, witless ass.
O Muse of Malice, give me power to pen
  For decent ears and eyes the thoughts I hold
Concerning one Francesca Brown, and then
  The nerve to tell her what she should be told!

NOCTURNE (Op. 2)

It is a very strange and curious thing
To see a person hanging by his thumbs,
While round about him, in a narrow ring,
March little demons with exulting drums.
It is an awe-inspiring sight to see
One's oldest friend turn slowly inside out,
Then hang his watch upon a friendly tree,
And greet his organisms with a shout.

It is a shocking thing to watch a man
Reduce himself to gravy, in a pot;
Then pour himself into a cooling pan
And weep because the mixture is too hot.
It is a solemn thing to play with verse,
And rhyme with shadows purple, green and white:
The wonder is it isn't often worse,
After such dreaming as I did last night.

TO ONE UNKNOWN

Once as I passed you in the street
  You turned away your head,
And looked into the windows of
  A barber shop instead.

I cannot think in such a place
  You found what you would seek...
Oh, was it that you liked me, Girl,
  And feared that I would speak?

PANHANDLER

Buchanan talked in sums of large importance,
His figures dazzled as his schemes amazed;
The brilliant sense and flow of his exhortance
Conquered, and left one feeling slightly dazed.

Millions for him were easy computations;
From oil to ermine ranged his arguments—
But always, at the end of his orations,
One found Buchanan needed fifty cents.

ON A LADY

Poets her conquering beauty tell in rhyme,
And Princes polish lyrics to her grace;
Bishops are writing ballads—even Time
Himself has written lines upon her face.

BED

This is the very same bed;
  In it my grandfather died.
Well I recall what he said:
"This is the very same bed..."
Just that—and next moment was dead.
  Now I am here with my bride.
This is the very same bed;
  In it my grandfather died!

LYRIC

Lady, if you speak the truth
  With your eyes of granite,
Little love and less of ruth
  Holds you to our planet.

Yet the pressure of a knee
  Mutes the strings of reason.
Soul, if this be treachery,
  Make the most of treason!

FOOTNOTE

Thus the prince in the fairy tale tarried:
  There was singing of harps and bright laughter;
And thus were the true lovers married,
  And happily lived... ever after?

Ever after! So endeth the pages
  As writ by the great versifiers.
"There were giants," they said, "in those ages."
  Ay, giants—and subsidized liars!

AT THE STATE FAIR

Over the heads of the yokels,
High on a swaying wire,
Mademoiselle Lepelletier
Dances and slithers and slides.
Slim her ankles, and round her calves
Under her foaming laces,
And the rustics gaze with wild desire
And feast their Puritan eyes.
But one goes home to his light o' love
And eyes her with disapproval,
And tries to imagine that dreadful girth
High on a swaying wire!

LA VIE LITTÉRAIRE

Then,
For the last time he dipped his pen
Into his heart, and wrote
"The End." It seemed a bugle note
Cried as he moved his hand across the sheet,
And something swelled and rattled in his throat.
Ah, it was sweet!
Yet in his heart the pain still lingered on,
A dull gray memory of agony,
Of turmoil and of tortured reverie
Often from dark to dawn;
The bittersweet of truth revealed, confessed...
It was himself he wrote into the book;
The wounds were his, they raged yet in his breast,
He was the victim of the rack and cross,
The torn, bruised thing he painted; his the loss,
The gain, the doubt, the joy, the sorrowing.
Let them but look
Into his pages who had eyes to see
And hearts to understand and sympathize,
And they would know his secret agony,
His fears, his courage, and his suffering.
These were not lies,
Decked out with tinsel trimmings and fine lace,
To while away an hour of idleness,

But the dark record of a great disgrace,
And victory born of a great distress...

And so the book went forth into the world,
Hurled
Into the maelstrom of contending wit
And specious fancy, lone as any leaf
Blown down the tides of commerce; and in time
He read what they who criticized had writ...

One said it was a litany of grief,
And gibbered of its melancholy splendor;
One from the paper jacket stole a phrase,
Agreeing that the love scenes were most tender,
Whilst one who thought to praise,
Although annoyed,
Spoke learnedly about himself and Freud,
And turned a clever rhyme...
A charlatan of brilliant reputation
Declared the fellow lacked imagination.